

Thursday, August 28, 2003
In war on weed, beetles winning

By MARK PETERS, Portland Press Herald Writer
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Julie Franklin examines a loosestrife plant at the base of a bluff next to Portland Head Light at Fort Williams Park in Cape Elizabeth.

Staff photo by Doug Jones Conservationist

Julie Franklin spent a morning in Cape Elizabeth this month distributing beetles that will destroy a pretty purple flower, fields of which appear in calendars that highlight New England's natural beauty.

Although she's a conservationist with a master's degree in environmental science, Franklin doesn't see all flowers as pretty, especially purple loosestrife.

Franklin and fellow members of the Cape Elizabeth Conservation Commission are trying to rid the town of this aggressive plant, which wreaks havoc on various habitats. And after two years, their efforts are starting to produce results.

"I was surprised. I really think it is making a difference," said Maureen O'Meara, Cape Elizabeth's town planner.

But commission members say they have many more plants to go. That is why Franklin distributed beetles earlier this month, making it the third release in three years.

"There was so much loosestrife it was difficult to know where to put (the beetles)," Franklin said.

Loosestrife is an aggressive plant variety found throughout the United States. The plant is not native to this country. It was brought over in the 1800s by settlers from Europe who put the plant in their flower gardens.

Although pretty, the plant spreads easily, pushing out native plants. Environmentalists point to the monarch butterfly, which can be driven out of areas because loosestrife pushes out the plants to which it is attracted.

The process of eliminating loose- strife with beetles only takes a few hours to set up. Franklin picked up Galerucella beetles, which come in potted plants of loosestrife, at the Rachel Carson

National Wildlife Refuge in Wells. The potted plants are then left in an area where the unwanted plant grows. The beetles spread out and eat the loosestrife.

Franklin followed a map, put together by commission members and police that showed where loose- strife is the thickest. Locations included Fort Williams Park, Delano Park and an area across from Hannaford Cove.

"You didn't have any sense of them. The (beetles) were really tiny," said Franklin, for whom it was the first year distributing beetles.

Although the winters can be tough on the beetles, commissioners said they hope the beetles will become established in various areas, living there until all of the loosestrife is eaten.

Cape Elizabeth is one of several communities in southern Maine that uses beetles to combat loosestrife. This effort at biological control, however, is falling short across the region this year because the Wells refuge had a beetle crop that was smaller than usual. The refuge is unsure what happened and is looking into why its beetle population is so low, said Susan Bloomfield, director of outreach and planning.

But the low beetle population did not prevent Cape Elizabeth from continuing to fight the purple plant.

The commission was unsure if it wanted to use beetles when the idea first came up three years ago. Research, however, showed that the beetles would only eat loosestrife and not have an adverse impact on the habitats in which they are placed, commission member Michael Pulsifer said.

"The positives far outweigh the negatives," he said.

Staff Writer Mark Peters can be contacted at 791-6325 or at: mpeters@pressherald.com